

The Space Between

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Graeme Tennant is originally from a small town in North Western Ontario, he currently lives in the Yukon. He likes living in the north because it provides plenty of inspiration, and fresh air. Graeme Tennant lives the life of a perpetual academic; he is currently taking courses through the Heritage Resource Management program at Athabasca University, and is planning on pursuing an MFA in creative writing. He writes for pleasure but still has a day job.

Abstract

In today's fast-paced world, many people escape the stress of daily life by indulging in online fantasy realms. As technology escalates this trend will continue, until there is no distinction between the real and virtual worlds. This is what I tried to capture with this story. This story is relevant to Integrated Studies because it looks at how entwined our lives have become with technology, especially the internet. I wrote this story as part of an open call for submissions to the journal.

The man didn't know anyone was watching him. It was nothing personal, just a job. His virtual wife had hired me to follow him. He liked to go for evening walks into other women's beds. Over the past few days I had followed him to a known brothel; even in the digital world no one can keep secrets forever. Hiding in the shadows, I watched the man for a while. He walked into a nearby building, knocked on the door three times, and disappeared inside.

I was about to follow him, when I heard a loud honking noise from outside my apartment window as an ambulance drove by. It distracted me long enough to break my concentration. The blinking lights from my clock told me it was three in the morning. Time to get some sleep. After all, I had to work my regular job in the morning. My eyes were bloodshot, my fingers cramped. I'd been playing online for far too long. I was totally engrossed in my fantasy land of *After Life*. Turning off my computer, I fell onto my bed and into the arms of sleep.

Sometimes I feel like a hermit hiding in the digital age. I live in the space between two very different worlds: the world where I have a bad day job and a crappy apartment; in the evenings, an "entrepreneur" in the digital frontier of *After Life*, a private detective for hire.

I've lived in my hometown all my life. I never had any reason to leave, especially now with *After Life*. Beyond the sleepy suburbs of this town are endless digital horizons. Over the years the Internet has quickly made its way into the sleepy little town of my childhood. The global village came knocking at its door, bringing a flood of technology. No longer were we separated and bound by small town rivalries between the kids from the next town over. Now people spend their evenings playing multiplayer video games with people from all over the world, while swearing at their televisions.

My mother likes to curl up with a good mystery novel in the evenings, but I like to sink into a good online mystery. She refuses to even try to learn how to use some of the new devices. I think she just has a mental block about things like that. She always asks me about sites like

Twitter and Facebook, and why they are so popular. She doesn't understand why I spend so much time online, thinks I'm wasting my life playing video games. She always says things like, "You're throwing your life away playing those games," and, "Is this what you want to do with your life?"

Sometimes I wonder whether kids these days will look back nostalgically at all the months and years they spent indoors playing video games. When I was a kid, I would spend hours listening to my mother's record collection, enjoying the tactile nature of taking the record from its sleeve, and blowing the dust off the needle and the record. This is something that is lost with the digital generation. Even the musty smell of the records triggers pleasant memories. How will people feel about their old outdated iPods when they are older, if they haven't already thrown them out?

In the morning, I barely heard my alarm go off. Sleep weighed heavy and crusted on my eyes. It was a grey and rainy November morning. Racing outside, I ran to the bus shelter. Squeezing past the others, I stood with my back against the wall. I watched as cars drove by, splashing muddy water onto the sidewalk. Everyone around me had already retreated into their own little worlds, headphones on, listening to music. No one spoke to one another. Their eyes stared blankly into space, or at their feet.

Out of the morning fog, the bus came to a screeching halt and we entered single file. I greeted the bus driver, but he only scowled. The florescent light felt unnatural on my skin. I listened to the sounds the bus made, its air brakes hissing like an angry cat, pebbles hitting the underside as it travelled down the rainy road. The lights from other vehicles looked like jewels as they drove past.

The familiar road to my job has changed little since I started working there part-time in university. The original business sign still remained; its paint was faded and chipped but still recognizable. In red letters "Old Cabin Offices" hung over the building's entrance.

The first faces that welcomed me as I enter the building were the many cameras, following my every move. We don't even need the security guards anymore, with the tireless eyes of Big Brother watching us.

I work as a paper pusher, no more than a salary man, cataloguing claims and reports that will never see the light of day. At my desk the grey sky melts into the grey cubicle walls, until I can't tell where one begins or the other ends.

I was greeted that morning with a small mountain of paperwork that had spilled all over my desk like an erupting volcano. As I settled in to tackle my workload, a familiar chime and whooshing noise came from my desktop computer. Email. It was marked urgent. It was from the meddling head of another department -- and my ex-girlfriend.

The tone of the email was passive aggressive. It was the usual for Patricia. She was always upset about one thing or another and was habitually meddling with other departments. I read the email with mild interest, picking out a few buzzwords, before going back to work.

Even as I began to tackle the mountain of paperwork I had to do, I could not help myself from using my phone to check for updates on the latest patches to *After Life*. A friend of mine was tweeting about how sweet the new patches made the environment feel -- more life-like. I couldn't wait to get home; anything was better than this hollow existence.

Everywhere in the office I see people chained to their tech devices. As people walk past my

desk I can't help but pick up parts of their conversations. They talk about how the new so-called smart devices have made their lives easier, making choices for them. They wander like zombies across the carpet at the mercy of technology. Their whole lives mapped out, dependent on computers.

On days like these, I feel like I'm just going through the motions, whittling away the hours until the end of the day so I can get back to my online life. I keep thinking back to the game, hardly focusing on my job. The sound of fingers clicking against keyboards as people text on their phones and work at their desks makes me impatient to leave this place.

Each hour seemed longer than the last. After the 3 p.m. brick wall hit, I began to slow down, and started to crave a jolt of caffeine. I decided it was a good time to sneak away and get a coffee.

Stepping outside, I could feel the eyes of the cameras following me. They're everywhere these days, in the streets, at work, people even carry them around with them in their pockets. "One world under surveillance" should become a new slogan for the 21st century.

There was a line-up at the coffee shop, as always. Most of the people there were plugged into their laptops. They sat with their computers in front of them using them as buffers between themselves and the real world.

The look in the barista's eyes was the same one I see staring back at me when I look in the mirror every morning. She gave and took peoples' change with a sour disposition. Her shoulders slouched, she greeted me in a monotone voice, her eyes looking at a point just beyond my ears.

After getting my coffee I quickly returned to work before anyone noticed I was gone. I knew that I was under the thumb and under a deadline when I found Patricia waiting at my desk.

"Just coming back from coffee?"

"Yes," I say flatly.

"I just want to go over some things with you from the email. Did you even read it?" she said.

"Yes, of course I did.

"Look Colin, I don't want our personal history to affect our working relationship. But we can't have people just sneaking off whenever they feel like it."

"What exactly do you want to talk about?"

"I know how distracted you can get and I just wanted to make sure you were getting things done, not slacking off at work."

"Patricia, I just went for a coffee. I'm back now and, as you see, I have a lot of work to do so if there's nothing else, I'd like to get back to it."

She left in a huff, her heels clicking, echoing, long after she'd gone. This day couldn't get any worse, but at least it was almost over.

I missed the bus, and didn't have an umbrella, so I cut through the malls to get out of the rain. Piercing eyes and gnashing voices echoed off the walls mingling with Christmas music. The bodies in the crowd were giving me claustrophobia. I pushed through the crowds as fast as I

could, winding my way through the maze of holiday shoppers.

I hate coming here because all the gang-bangers like to hang out in these places and, sure enough, there were three by the fountain by the front entrance. Dressed in big baggy clothes and covered in gold chains, they looked like they watched too much MTV.

They yelled curses as people walked past. I avoided eye contact with them as I walked past. One of them called out to me, "Hey, Casper! Where you going in such a hurry?" They laughed amongst themselves as I walked past.

I hurried home as fast as I could, not wanting to waste any valuable time outside that could be spent online.

Outside my apartment the streetlights flickered and hummed, casting shadows into the night. The carpet always smelled like bleach. The hallway hummed with the echoes of life behind closed doors. The wallpaper had smoke and grime soaked deep into it. I always shudder whenever I walk in from the outside.

In my apartment, the pale light from the streetlights streamed in through the window. It cast shadows on the empty pop cans and half-eaten snacks scattered about the room.

My room was a mess. Unwashed dishes were piled near the sink. Clothes were scattered about everywhere. It looked like a tornado had come through. My answering machine was blinking. No doubt my mother has been calling.

I make more money online than I do at my day job. Even online people need the services of a good private investigator. Business here is good. It's perpetual night here in *After Life*; perhaps that's why peoples' libidos seem to run unchecked. The summer breeze flows through my window. The gritty streets of 1930s New York stretch out past the horizon.

I threw off my office clothes, changed into my favourite loungewear and got into character. Sitting in my underwear I log in: atmospheric music fills the room and the stress from the day washes away with the click of a button.

I am instantly transported into a better world. I have my own office with a view of the city below. I pour myself a glass of bourbon and light a cigarette. As the connection is made the space between the two worlds nearly vanishes. Until the day when these worlds are one and the same, I will remain a visitor in both.
